

Opening the Door to Virginia's Coastal Resources

A Coastal-Zone Wide and Regional Perspective on Public Access Needs



Submitted by:

Virginia Coastal Program
Department of Environmental Quality
629 East Main Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219



In partnership with:



Section 1: Background/Introduction

Virginia's beaches, fishing piers, lighthouses, boat ramps, canoe and kayak trails, greenways and natural areas are all critical to providing meaningful public access opportunities and to supporting the coastal economy. Virginians have repeatedly supported programs to enhance public access, open space and nature-based tourism activities.

Defined by the boundaries of counties, cities and towns adjacent to tidal waters of the Commonwealth, Virginia's coastal zone covers 8,800 square miles or approximately one quarter of the state. According to recent measurements, the interface between open water and land in the coastal zone extends along more than 10,000 miles of tidal shoreline. Land in the coastal plain extends from the flat sandy soils of the Eastern Shore and southeastern Virginia, to the gently rolling forests and farmlands of the Peninsula, Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck.

In this tremendously diverse coastal area, only 1% of the shoreline is publicly owned so providing the residents of Virginia, and its visitors, with sufficient access to our natural resources is challenging. It is important not only to provide points of access, through public land ownership but to give the public meaningful coastal experiences that draw upon the Commonwealth's maritime heritage and natural wonder.

The 2002 Virginia Outdoors Plan and the 2001 Virginia Coastal Program Section 309 Needs Assessment both identified several issues related to public access planning in the Commonwealth that need improvement.

a. Acquisition – Use conflicts, habitat protection needs and issues relating to underserved populations can all be addressed partially through acquisition of additional sites. For example, through the Chesapeake 2000 Agreement, Virginia has committed to provide 60 new access points by 2010. In addition, the Virginia Outdoors Plan generally identifies new public access needs of specific *types* throughout Virginia.

b. Maintenance and Management of Existing Holdings – With tight state budgets, government entities often lack the necessary resources and staff to manage current holdings. Grant programs often provide significant funding for land acquisition, but few provide for costs associated with management of the acquisition. Similarly, the implementation of well designed management plans for these sites (i.e. facility improvements, habitat restoration etc.) does not always occur due to lack of funding.

c. Public Information – Virginia has hundreds of public access areas and places to take in the beauty of the coastal zone. Easily-accessible, comprehensive guides that feature these areas are still lacking. The guides produced for the public have focused on a single type of use (i.e. hiking guides) or have been very general (i.e. natural area designations on a paper map).

Working with the Virginia Coastal Program and its extensive network of partners, this project is designed to address public access information needs throughout the coastal zone and to also work on specific regional issues of acquisition and management. This project will provide the NOAA Coastal Management Fellow with exposure to the many natural resource, economic development and tourism agencies in Virginia in developing strategies to improve our current public access programs. One of the main goals of the Virginia Coastal Program is to coordinate activities that cut across traditional agency jurisdictions and to promote both environmentally and economically sustainable practices. Enhancement of public access sites, management programs and resources is a perfect example of how Virginia's Coastal Program can work to serve the Commonwealth.

Section 2. Goals and Objectives of this Project

This project has been designed as two parts, with each addressing a different public access issue. One part of the project will be primarily working at the state level to improve public access information resources and encourage nature-based tourism. The second part of the project is working directly with a regional entity dedicated to the acquisition and management of specific public access sites.

Throughout this project the Fellow will have the opportunity to work with the coastal program network of partners (11 state agencies, 8 regional commissions and 88 localities).

The objectives under each goal are listed in order of the Program's priorities. For example, under Goal #1, it is our top priority that Objective #1 be completed, then Objective #2 and as the project proceeds, we can evaluate the feasibility of achieving Objectives #3 and #4.

Goal 1: Improve public access information availability for Virginia's coastal zone.

Objective 1: Create a detailed and searchable online resource of the more than 200 traditional public access sites in Virginia's coastal zone (i.e. natural areas, boat ramps, beaches, fishing piers etc.).

Objective 2: Define criteria for the types of sites that exemplify a "coastal experience". (e.g. working waterfronts, local seafood restaurant and historic coastal towns).

Objective 3: Create a list of "coastal experience" sites.

Objective 4: Populate the online resource created above with "coastal experience" sites.

Goal 2. Develop and implement public access standards in the Middle Peninsula

Objective 1: Implement the management plan for the Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority's first acquisition (130 acre site).

Objective 2: Develop acquisition methodology targeting neglected public landings and other sites for inclusion in the Regional Public Access Master Plan.

Objective 3: Develop access standards for the Middle Peninsula of Virginia that address types of access, density, uses and management.

Sections 3 and 4. Project Description/Milestones and Outcomes

In August 2005, the Fellow will meet with project partners for both tasks to get oriented, confirm timetables, discuss work programs and to lay out project responsibilities.

A. IMPROVE PUBLIC ACCESS INFORMATION AVAILABILITY FOR VIRGINIA'S COASTAL ZONE.

Several state agencies, regional authorities, local governments and NGOs are involved in public access, open space and land conservation efforts in Virginia. As technological capabilities increase, many of these organizations are also beginning to develop online guides to their sites. While these efforts are substantial and should not be duplicated, each organization's focus is often specific to their particular mission and needs. A comprehensive guide to public access and coastal experiences is still needed. Throughout this entire project, stakeholders in the coastal program network and beyond will be consulted for guidance on development of these tools. Other states have moved in

this direction as well and a couple good examples of coastal public access guides are available from the Massachusetts and Connecticut CZM programs through the following links:

Massachusetts Coastal Guide to Boston and the North Shore

(<http://www.mass.gov/czm/coastguide/index.htm>)

Connecticut Coastal Access Guide

(<http://www.lisrc.uconn.edu/coastalaccess/>)

Objective 1: Create a detailed and searchable online resource of the more than 200 traditional public access sites in Virginia's coastal zone (i.e. natural areas, boat ramps, beaches, fishing piers etc.). Working with partner agencies, determine what information is currently available on publicly owned access sites. Information needed could include: site descriptions, GPS location, driving directions, facilities, pictures and use restrictions. Fieldwork to collect missing information should be conducted to the greatest extent practicable.

October 2005 – Inventory existing and planned databases of public access information

January 2006 – Determine additional information needs of project partners

April 2006 – Develop an estimate of costs (in staff time and resources) to collect any missing information.

May 2006 – Establish a framework for online resource (data fields, presentation) and evaluate the best way to get this information online (ArcIMS site, searchable database etc.)

November 2006 – Populate the database using existing databases and collecting new information where appropriate.

Objective 2: Define criteria for the types of sites that exemplify a “coastal experience” (e.g. working waterfronts, local seafood restaurant and historic coastal towns). An advisory committee comprised of coastal program partners, local governments, NGOs and tourism councils will be convened to develop criteria for sites that will be included as “coastal experiences”. Issues that should be considered include: feasibility of inclusion, legality of including private businesses, information availability and consistency with Virginia Coastal Program goals.

January 2006 – Develop potential criteria to define a “coastal experience” for a stakeholder group presentation

May 2006 – Establish final criteria for a “coastal experience” based on stakeholder input.

Objective 3: Create a list of “coastal experience” sites. Applying the criteria developed under Objective #2; create a list of specific “coastal experience” sites for eventual inclusion in the online resource created under Objective #1.

September 2006 – Complete an inventory of existing and planned databases of “coastal experience” information

January 2007 – Determine additional information needs of project partners

February 2007 – Develop an estimate of costs (in staff time and resources) to collect any missing information.

March 2007 – Create a list of sites for inclusion in the online resource

Objective 4: Populate the online resource created above with “coastal experience” sites. This online resource will serve as an education, outreach and tourism tool. Based on the sites identified under Objective 3, populate the online resource with information on these additional sites. Additional field work should also be conducted to the greatest extent practicable. Marketing of this site and demonstration of its capabilities and usefulness at meetings will also be necessary.

April 2007 – Develop an outreach and marketing strategy for this new database
May 2007 – Populate online resource with “coastal experience” information
July 2007 – Complete presentations and outreach activities to promote this new tool

B. DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT PUBLIC ACCESS STANDARDS IN THE MIDDLE PENINSULA

The Middle Peninsula of Virginia comprises 6 counties and 3 towns nestled between the Rappahannock and York Rivers. Mobjack Bay, the guinea marshes and the Dragon Run exemplify this area’s vast natural resources and water dependent culture. Much of the public access to the water in this region has been provided informally through neglected public landings and road terminus points, many having served previously as steamboat landings. As population and need increase in Virginia, it is necessary to create a more formal network of public access throughout the region.

With Coastal Program funding assistance, the Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission has taken a very innovative and unique approach to addressing their public access needs. In 2003, the Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority (PAA), a new regional governmental entity, was created for the sole purpose of addressing public access issues in its member localities.

The Authority members recognize that shorelines are high priority natural areas and that, as population density increases, it is critical that they set aside recreational access sites for all types of recreational activities, such as birding, hunting, fishing, boating, picnicking and sight seeing. These activities are important to both the economy and to the citizens of the Commonwealth.

A key component for this part of the project will be to identify opportunities to leverage additional resources to support these objectives and future activities of the PAA.

Objective 1: Implement the management plan for the Public Access Authority’s first acquisition (130 acre site). In December 2003, the Public Access Authority acquired the 130 acre Browne tract using Coastal Program funds. As part of the acquisition requirement, a Browne tract management plan has been produced. All of the recommendations (e.g. trail development) are in need of implementation. The Authority is prepared to offer up to \$30,000 for leverage for implementation activities.

May 2006 - Develop implementation strategy to determine which activities should be undertaken first (e.g. habitat restoration, trail development and parking improvements).

July 2006 - Develop a timeline and budget for implementing the strategy.

July 2007 - Develop a final report to be distributed to Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority documenting implementation successes and failures and future directions.

Objective 2: Develop acquisition methodology targeting neglected public landings and other sites for inclusion in the Regional Public Access Master Plan. Prior to the 1930s, most commerce in the Middle Peninsula used a network of steamboat landings. The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) owned and managed all this access, however, with changes in the transportation structure these steamboat landing are no longer used. VDOT still owns these terminus points but no longer actively manages them. This effort seeks to reclaim key neglected public landings for local public access use. This process will be complex. Hundreds of potential

sites have already been inventoried with Coastal Program funding. Administration and oversight of the reacquisition process will include right-of-way determination, functionality determination and development of conceptual use plan for inclusion in the Authority's Public Access Master Plan.

December 2005 -Develop prioritization methodology for key neglected public landings for local public access use.

February 2006-Establish a steering committee to facilitate the active management of sites and to streamline the bureaucratic process.

June 2006 -Work with the members of the Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority to develop a hierarchy of use for sites to determine appropriate use. Issues to consider include proximity to existing access sites, usage type and levels at existing sites, anticipated future demand, future land use, transportation and other planning issues.

July 2006 – Establish the process for management of neglected public landings.

September 2006 – Develop an anticipated acquisition cost estimate and timeline

October 2006-July 2007 – Initiate management process for sites and update the PAA Board regularly on the status of each project.

Objective 3: Develop access standards for the Middle Peninsula of Virginia that address types of access, density, uses and management. In developing access standards for the Middle Peninsula topics such as the type of users, use restrictions, appropriate fee systems, public service provisions, parking requirements should be addressed. These standards should also address whether access should be: **Geographic Based** (i.e. regional, local, or community sites); **Use Based** (i.e. boating with trailer, paddling- car top limited parking, paddling – car top no parking, walking and birding limited parking or walking and birding no parking); **Natural Feature Based** (i.e. tidal marshes, freshwater); or **Density and Infrastructure Based** (i.e. access site every “X” miles of road, access site every “X” miles of shoreline or access site based on diversity of opportunities).

January 2006 – Present draft access standards to the Access Authority Board of Directors

March 2006 – Finalize access standards serving the Middle Peninsula Region

Section 5. Fellow Mentoring

The Fellow will be housed with the Virginia Coastal Program at the Department of Environmental Quality in Richmond under the direct supervision and guidance of the Coastal Program Manager, Laura McKay. Julie Bixby, Coastal Program Planner, will provide primary mentoring for this project.

The Fellow will have open access to all six Coastal Program staff on a daily basis. Specialties within the program range widely from policy, planning and project management to outreach and GIS/Access database applications. There are also significant resources within the Department of Environmental Quality that can assist the Fellow in technical development (GIS applications, Arc IMS, web development). There are funds available to provide additional technical training opportunities throughout this project, if needed.

In addition to expertise within the Coastal Program itself, the Fellow will work closely with representatives of other natural resource, public access, tourism and economic development agencies in Virginia. Members of the Virginia Coastal Policy Team (32 members and alternates) will be available to the Fellow throughout this project for assistance and guidance.

Lewis Lawrence, Director of Regional Planning at the Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission in Saluda, VA, will provide mentoring to the Fellow to achieve Goal 2. The Public Access Authority Board members, county administrators and town managers of the member jurisdictions, will also be available to provide guidance and feedback on the project. The Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission has strong ties in the region to citizens, businesses, economic development partnerships, tourism councils and planning organizations. The full extent of these resources will be available to the Fellow in pursuing this project.

Section 6. Project Partners

There are several entities and agencies in Virginia whose efforts support the improvement of public access in the Commonwealth. While this project will be coordinated with many groups, below is a brief description of a few of the major players.

Virginia Coastal Program

The Virginia Coastal Program's mission (at the Department of Environmental Quality) is to protect and restore the Commonwealth's coastal ecosystems while also strengthening the coastal economy. Specifically, Goal #6 of the Program's Executive Order is "To promote sustainable ecotourism and to increase public access compatible with resource protection goals." With the cooperation of the agencies and localities that comprise the Virginia Coastal Program network, cross-cutting issues can be addressed comprehensively. The Coastal Program has funded land acquisition, developed management plans, constructed access sites and is currently supporting several efforts to improve coastal management information availability. For more information,

<http://www.deq.virginia.gov/coastal/whatnew.html>

Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority (MPCBPAA)

The MPCBPAA is focusing comprehensively on public access issues on a regional basis by:

- (1) Identifying land, either owned by the Commonwealth or private holdings, that can be secured for use by the general public as a public access site;
- (2) Researching and determining ownership of all identified sites;
- (3) Determining appropriate public use levels of identified access sites;
- (4) Developing appropriate mechanisms for transferring title of Commonwealth or private holdings to the Authority;
- (5) Developing appropriate acquisition and site management plans for public access usage;
- (6) Determining which holdings should be sold to advance the mission of the Authority.

For more information, <http://www.mppdc.com/project/access.shtml>

Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR)

DCR's mission is to conserve, protect, enhance, and advocate the wise use of the Commonwealth's unique natural, historic, recreational, scenic and cultural resources. As a part of achieving this mission, DCR produced the *Virginia Outdoors Plan*, the state's official conservation, outdoor recreation and open space plan. This plan inventories public holdings and needs throughout the state. As DCR is not the only state agency with responsibility for public access, the *Virginia Outdoors Plan* is an important planning resource for the entire Commonwealth. For more information, <http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/>

Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF)

DGIF is very involved in promoting ecotourism opportunities in the Commonwealth. In addition, DGIF owns and manages a network of boat ramps and wildlife management areas in the state. DGIF also developed the Virginia Birding and Wildlife trail, a network of sites that provide a wildlife, natural resource or historic experience. For more information, <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/>

Destination Marketing Organizations

The Virginia Tourism Corporation's Vision Plan states that Virginia's goal is to be "Number One" in ecotourism in the United States. At the state, regional and local level, there are many destination marketing organizations that promote Virginia tourism. The focus of these organizations is primarily economic growth and in the coastal area of Virginia nature-based activities draw a significant amount of tourism. Virginia has over 240,000 registered boats. Boat-related activities such as fishing, sailing, and water-skiing, generated more than 15 million activity-days in the coastal zone. One of the main goals of these organizations is to mass market destination guides and information resources. For more information on the Virginia Tourism Corporation, (<http://www.vatc.org>).

Section 7. Cost Share Description

The Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority will be contributing \$7,500 per year towards the Fellow's salary. This contribution will be provided from their operating fund, which is an entirely private (non-federal) fund.

The Fellow will be housed in the offices of the Virginia Coastal Program at the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality in Richmond, Virginia and will have access to the services, hardware and software provided by the agency. Any additional needs (technical training, travel, and specialized software) will be supported through the Virginia Coastal Program's operating budget (federal funds).